

*Empire Falls, by Richard Russo*

Review for MFC Book Club written by Kimberly Mach

Life in a small town is something we at Middlefield Federated Church know a little bit about. How fitting then, that our communities should choose for this year's One Book One Community project a novel about a small town and its people. *Empire Falls*, by Richard Russo, spurred one of the liveliest discussions to date in the MFC Book Club; it really got us thinking.

The backstory is one we know all too well, reminiscent of mill and factory towns everywhere. When the mill of Empire Falls began to lose money, the owners sought solutions outside of the town, where the expenses might be less. Jobs were relocated and the mill shut down, throwing hundreds of people out of work. The effects of a mill shut-down, like the one in Empire Falls or factories in cities like Detroit, are far-reaching, creating concentric circles that eventually touch everything. It's like dropping a pebble in the water. You can't stand on the shore and not get hit. The book opens after the epic shut down, in the modern day. When we first meet the characters the mill has been closed for several decades, and the town has already fallen into disrepair, its population declining. The people and the businesses limp along, trying to redefine themselves and their purpose.

We found that the strength of Russo's novel was not the storyline itself, but rather the characters. They felt like real people, and each viewpoint was unique. Russo masterfully tells the story of the town of Empire Falls from more than six different viewpoints. In fact, as a group, we found it humorous that we learned about the high school principal from the point of view of one of the teenagers first. When another

character, a parent, described the same man later we had trouble believing the two descriptions referred to the same person. True to life, the parent and the child saw the same person and situation very differently.

More than anything *Empire Falls* is the story of everyday people in an everyday struggle to do the right thing, to be at peace with their decisions, and to live life in a way that brings them the greatest amount of happiness. Like all of us, there are mishaps and mistakes for the characters along the way. There are extreme characters who point out our flaws as human beings and our tendency to go ‘overboard’, characters who focus on only their immediate satisfaction, regardless of the cost to others. We laugh at their ‘never-may-care’ and selfish attitude, but find there is something to be learned from them, too. There are others, the main character included, who deny themselves almost everything in hopes of atoning for mistakes, mistakes that may or may not be real. From this behavior, too, we learn a little something. All things in moderation, including guilt. It’s these side stories that make the town and its people feel so real.

*Empire Falls* is a book about life and all the ways to live a life. It is a book about choices, and a reminder that we have choices, and that the greatest challenge of living may be to be at peace with those choices.

Join us next time on Monday, February 18, at 7pm, when we meet to discuss *Peace Like a River*, by Leif Enger, a story of miracles, family, life, and faith.

The MFC Book Club – *guaranteed discussion to make you think*